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AUTHOR	Cheney, Christine; Demchak, MaryAnn
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ABSTRACT

A 2-year followup evaluation was conducted with 1 male and 19 female rural Nevada regular and special education teachers and related service workers who had participated in two summer institutes on teaching practices for students with severe, multiple disabilities and students with emotional disturbances. Telephone interviews sought to determine the effectiveness of summer institutes as a method of providing information regarding low incidence disabilities. Six themes emerged in the area of professional impact: (1) information was implemented in classrooms; (2) long-lasting teacher support networks were established; (3) information was passed on to other school personnel and parents who did not participate in the institutes; (4) changes occurred in participants' philosophy and attitudes; (5) information was obtained on laws and policies related to special education; and (6) participants were frustrated in attempting to make building-level changes upon returning to their schools. The concentrated nature of the institutes appealed to participants, and half the participants reported that grant funding enabled their attendance. The most common factor that would influence participation in future institutes was the topic. Other factors included logistical factors and earning recertification credits. It is noteworthy that participants were able to describe specific strategies and materials being implemented on the job 2 years after the institutes. A particularly valuable outcome of the summer institutes was the formation of lasting networks of professionals that could call on each other for information, resources, or support. The interview protocol and participant comments are included. (TD)

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ED 429 768

Christine Cheney
MaryAnn Demchak
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
University of Nevada, Reno
Reno, NV 89557

AN EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUMMER INSTITUTES FOR RURAL TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH LOW INCIDENCE DISABILITIES

Teachers in rural areas often have difficulty obtaining new information as well as college credits needed for recertification or professional development. It may be particularly difficult for teachers to gain information in specialized areas such as low incidence disabilities. Options available to teachers in rural areas include correspondence courses, web-based courses, live audio and/or video courses, video-taped course, and travel to a distant site. Travel to a distant site includes traditional weekly course offerings, weekend courses, as well as intensive summer institutes. Advantages and disadvantages exist for all of these methods of professional development. The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the results of a long-term (i.e., 2 years) follow-up evaluation of summer institutes as a method of providing information regarding low incidence disabilities.

Method

Participants

Participants included 20 teachers and related service providers from throughout the state of Nevada who participated in two summer institutes sponsored by a U. S. Department of Education personnel preparation grant (i.e., Project PRESS: Preparing Educators of Students with Severe Disabilities). Each individual participated in a basic and advanced institute pertaining to teaching practices for students with severe, multiple disabilities and students with emotional disturbance. Nineteen females participated while only one male was involved. At the time of the interviews, six participants were elementary general education teachers. Nine participants were special education teachers. Four related service providers (i.e., speech pathology, school counseling) also participated in both institutes. The final participant, formerly a special education teacher, was currently the director of a child care facility.

Procedures

After obtaining informed consent and arranging a mutually convenient time, telephone interviews, ranging from less than 5 minutes to 25 minutes, were conducted with each participant. Each interview was audiotaped and subsequently a verbatim transcription was made. Each participant was asked the same basic questions with follow-up clarification questions if needed. The interview protocol is included in Table 1.

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Table 1
Protocol Used For Telephone Interviews with Participants

1. In addition to Project PRESS summer institutes, have you ever participated in any other summer institutes?
2. In general, what did you find beneficial about participating in the summer institutes sponsored by Project PRESS or others?
3. Were there aspects of the summer institutes that were not beneficial? If yes, describe these aspects.
4. Describe how your involvement in the summer institutes benefited your students.
5. Describe specific instances of how you implemented knowledge from the summer institutes in your job responsibilities.
6. Why did you enroll in the first Project PRESS summer institute?
7. Why did you enroll in the second Project PRESS summer institute?
8. What role did the fact that the Project PRESS institutes were supported by a grant influence your decision to enroll?
9. Did you experience any unanticipated benefits from your participation in the summer institutes?
10. Did you experience any unanticipated negative outcomes from your participation in the summer institutes?
11. Did you form any continuing networks of support with other summer institute participants? If yes, please describe. If no, please discuss.
12. Describe how likely or unlikely you are to participate in summer institutes in the future. What factors will influence your decision?

Data Analysis

The authors read and re-read each interview to identify specific themes that emerged. Themes emerged from repeated words, phrases, constructs or ideas in the transcripts, rather than themes being determined prior to data collection and analysis (Patton, 1990). Themes expressed by more than one participant were classified into categories. Each participant response was reviewed to determine if it belonged in an existing category or if it was a new theme belonging in a new category. Through repeated readings of the transcripts, all responses were considered and reconsidered to confirm or redefine the categories until all relevant data were accommodated.

Results

Professional Impact

Six themes emerged in the area of professional impact: (a) information was implemented in classrooms, (b) long-lasting networks of support were established, (c) information was passed onto others who did not participate in the institutes, (d) changes in philosophy and attitudes occurred, (e) information was obtained on laws and policies related to special education, and (f) frustration with attempting to make building-level changes upon returning to their schools. Each is discussed below, under a quote from a participant that illustrates the theme.

"We Got Things We Could Use In Our Classrooms"

Every participant was overwhelmed with the amount of practical information that they could take back to their classrooms and schools for immediate implementation. As part of each institute, participants received a 3-inch binder of materials for discussion and use. Virtually all of the participants made reference to using these materials and forms in their on-going professional responsibilities. In many instances, the participants adapted information for use with students without disabilities as well as those with milder disabilities than was the focus of the institutes. The participants frequently mentioned strategies pertaining to implementing successful inclusive education (e.g., instructional matrices, making accommodations), developing positive behavioral support plans, documenting student progress, implementing peer advocacy / tutoring programs, and developing functional IEP goals and objectives (e.g., community-based instruction).

"Other Peoples' Ideas Were Priceless"

The majority (i.e., 17) of participants reported that they formed lasting networks of support within their local areas as well as across the state. In many instances participants from the same school district formed closer ties and working relations that were still active 2 years following the second institute (i.e., at the time of the interviews). Similarly, participants formed lasting support networks with others who might be located hundreds of miles away in another district. They indicated that they saw each other at state conferences and meetings, frequently called one another, and/or frequently e-mailed others. These on-going contacts were friendships as well as professional relationships; participants discussed maintaining these contacts to exchange strategies and ideas and to share information regarding resources. Many participants discussed how important these networks were given their isolation due to the rural and remote nature of Nevada.

"It Gave Me the Confidence to ... Facilitate ... A Collegial Relationship with My Regular Ed Peers"

The majority of participants reported sharing information with others upon their return to their schools. Although most participants discussed sharing information with other professionals, some participants also included parents and paraprofessionals when they shared information at the local level. Four of the participants actually presented information based on institute material at in-service trainings and/or teacher meetings at their schools. One teacher reported relying heavily on institute material in her role as her school's coordinator of a "teachers assisting teachers" program. Another teacher reported that the information he acquired in the institutes helped him in a due process hearing. However, the majority of information shared with others was on a more informal basis: (a) through IEP meetings, (b) in the teachers' lounge, (c) teachers who did not attend the institutes dropping by with specific questions, and (d) sharing materials from their binders.

"It's Really Made a Big Difference with My Thinking"

Several participants reported broadening their perceptions of students who could be successfully included in general education classes as well as facilitating an understanding of the benefits of inclusion. Additionally, attitudes changed from thinking inclusion meant simply physically placing students with disabilities in regular education classes to realizing that specific strategies must be implemented for successful inclusion.

"I Was ... Enlightened By ... Laws That Were In Effect and My Obligations As An Educator"

A few participants indicated that current law and policy regarding their obligations as regular education teachers surprised them. Additionally, one special education teacher reported sharing this type of information with the regular education teachers in her school.

"Change Is Always Hard" "I Am Just Tearing My Hair Out!"

A few participants reported their frustration upon returning to their local sites and attempting to implement change within their buildings. Three of the participants discussed the importance of cultivating administrative support. One of these participants was watching for workshops to suggest to her administrators. Another frustration related to learning to work with other adults rather than interacting with students. Another frustration related to staffing issues and lack of resources.

Logistical Considerations

"Get It Over In A Shorter Period of Time"

Several of the participants reported that attending a summer institute over a period of two weeks "was a really good way to present it." Attending over two weeks allowed them to earn two graduate credits as well as limited the amount of time they were away from home. The concentrated nature of a summer institute appealed to other participants.

I Would Have Enrolled Regardless of Funding"

Half of the participants reported that the fact that the institutes were grant supported had no effect on their decision to enroll. They reported that they would have enrolled regardless because of the timing, topics to be covered, or the opportunity to earn two graduate credits in 2 weeks.

"The Grant Made A Difference"

On the other hand, half of the participants reported that receiving funding made it possible for them to attend the institutes or provided the incentive they needed to attend. For example, participants specifically mentioned insufficient personal funds would have prohibited them from attending the institute. Other participants discussed that grant funding "was more of an incentive to really do it."

Participation in Future Institutes

Participants reported several factors would influence the likelihood of participation in future institutes. By far the most common influencing factor related to the topic. Other factors included (a) logistical factors (e.g., scheduling, finances, location) and (b) earning recertification credits.

Discussion

It is noteworthy that 2 years after the second summer institute the participants were able to describe specific strategies and materials being implemented on the job as a result of their involvement. The practical nature of the content of the summer institutes contributed to the value the participants placed on the information received. Not only did the content of the institutes have a long lasting impact, the support networks formed among participants were continuing at the 2 year follow-up.

Rural special education teachers and related service providers are often isolated from other professionals who are in similar roles. Improved technology such as distance education, correspondence courses, videotape and web-based courses are often used by these educators for professional development and to access the latest information related to their roles. However, these technologies, as valuable as they are, do not allow for a variety of the elements that participants in the summer institute reported as particularly valuable. Chief among the advantages of a summer institute is the ability to form a lasting network of professionals to call on for information, resources or support. Interestingly, these lasting networks were formed in only a 2 week time frame. In addition, the intense nature of the summer institute did not seem to be a disadvantage in the amount of information acquired and generalized to the teaching setting. Further, many of the participants indicated that the intense time frame was needed by professionals living at a considerable distance from a university.

References

Patton, M. Q. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

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